‘Talking won’t save the planet’: uniting efforts to save Panama’s parks

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Juan Carlos Navarro shares his hopes and frustrations as he works to protect his country’s biodiversity and fight climate change.

1. Esme Hedley

    1. Esme Hedley is a science writer based in London.

Juan Carlos Navarro is Panama’s environment minister. Credit: Kevin Chong

“I wish you could hear this picture; it was taken just after daybreak and the birds’ dawn chorus was in full swing. Here, I’m standing with a guardaparque — a park ranger — hoping for a rare sighting of an orange-bellied trogon (*Trogon collaris aurantiiventris*) or a violet-bellied hummingbird (*Chlorestes julie*) in the Altos de Campana National Park in Panama.

As minister of the environment for the Panamanian government, I made this trek as part of my tour of 26 of Panama’s national parks and protected areas, during my first 100 days in office. I met with scientists, guardaparques and administrators to review the 12-month plan for this park. In September 2024, I visited Coiba National Park, a protected island and UNESCO World Heritage Site, accompanied by Edgardo Diaz-Ferguson, who leads the scientific research station on Coiba, studying the ocean and island life.

We want to collaborate with more international scientists to understand our biological heritage better and improve our park-management plans. All conservation in the future must be science-based, have community support and be done with private-sector involvement; we need to work together to safeguard our biodiversity and fight climate change.

Larger countries are more responsible for the climate crisis than are small ones such as Panama. In September last year, I attended Climate Week NYC and the United Nations General Assembly in New York City to discuss international climate policy. The trip was hopeful, but also frustrating. The UN has done wonderful work, but just bureaucracy and talking won’t save the planet. That UN world is all limos and private jets; these people are sipping coffee and cocktails while the world is literally burning. These actions are what isolate leaders from ordinary people, and from nature. We need to commit to making real change now; the time to act was yesterday.”

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This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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